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# Reflections on the First Decade of the Freedom Movement (1955-1965): The Changing Role of the Christian in an Era of Non-Violent Direct Action

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REFLECTIONS  
ON  
THE FIRST DECADE OF THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT  
----- (1955 - 1965) -----

The Changing Role of the Christian in an  
era of Non-Violent Direct Action

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Address: by Robert F. Drinan, S. J., Dean, Boston College Law  
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At: Marquette University, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

To: Marquette Faculty Association for Interracial Justice  
and Students United for Racial Equality

Time: Tuesday, July 20, 1965, 8:00 P.M.

The American Negro in the summer of 1965 sees himself as "standing between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born". Barriers to equality in the South have been declared illegal and almost every Northern community is aware of and responsive to the poor in its midst, - that segment of society hitherto invisible and unacknowledged.

The Negro in America has witnessed the crumbling of walls and the permeation of the white community with a feeling that something should be done. The world of silent segregation in the South and the invisible "other America" in the North are hopefully dead; but it is by no means certain that another world of equality and integration is being born.

At this historic turning point in race relations in America the Negro and everyone interested in his advancement must re-assess the efficacy and the wisdom of the continued use of the methods and tactics by which the Negro in America has finally come to the point where equality, justice and integration are the ideals to which law and society are committed.

Countless methods and tactics have been employed during the past century to bring freedom to the Negro. The deepening moral indignation, shame and guilt of the white race in America at the unbelievable injustices inflicted on the Negro have, of course, been the basic reason why true emancipation for the Negro is now finally at least a possibility. But it has been the Freedom Movement, - the revolution started on December 1, 1955 when Mrs. Rosa Parks, a 43 year old Negro seamstress, refused to move to the rear of a bus in Montgomery, - which has destroyed one world and has made possible another, - and a brighter world. The Freedom Movement assumed that



recourse to legislatures and courts must continue but that activity of this sort would not and could not succeed without a simultaneous program of direct, non-violent action. It is this latter activity which, more than any other single event during the last 100 years, has awakened the white conscience and has reversed a widespread pattern of depression, discouragement and even demoralization present in many sectors of the Negro community.

Some white persons will confess their shame and humiliation that Negroes were obliged to carry on a campaign of boycotts, sit-ins and demonstrations before the white majority would recognize the fact of white supremacy. Some few white persons might be perceptive and humble enough to admit that they would again forget the Negro if they were not continuously reminded of his plight by demonstrations and other dramatic means undertaken to awaken and shock the conscience of the white power structure.

The number of white persons, however, who would actually admit the need of demonstrations to keep their conscience alive might be small. On the other hand, the number of white Americans who can honestly deny that the Freedom Movement has not made them more sympathetic to the Negro cause must indeed also be small.

The monumental victories of the ten year old Freedom Movement therefore are beyond dispute. The most recent major victory for Negro freedom which is directly and almost exclusively attributable to direct non-violent demonstrations is the enactment by Congress of the voting rights bill, - a measure for which the dramatic march from Selma is directly responsible.

It is indeed a mystery that many -- perhaps most -- white persons do not recognize or acknowledge the fact that virtually all of the spectacular gains made by the Negro in the last decade have

come about only because of intense pressure by Negroes and civil rights groups on the complacent white majority. It may be that most white persons do not want to admit publicly that they had to be forced into giving justice to the Negroes. Or it may be that most white Americans are so oblivious of the existence and the problems of the Negro that they are hardly aware of the injustices he suffers and the recent victories he has attained.

One may take several positions with respect to <sup>the</sup> struggle of direct, non-violent action which began in Montgomery and which will be ten years old in December 1965. Among the positions which can be assumed with regard to this decade of direct action are the following:

(1) One may contend that the Negro, during the past decade, has won his case with the people and in the courts and the legislatures and that now he should forego all direct action and concentrate on bringing about improved housing, education and employment opportunities for the non-white citizens of America.

(2) One may maintain, on the other hand, that the intense militancy manifested in the civil rights movement from 1955 to 1965 is now no longer required and that in fact its continuation may alienate well-intentioned segments of the white community. According to this view Negro militancy should now be substantially restricted and direct action employed only after every other alternative has been exhausted.

(3) A third view of the last ten years of Negro militancy would conclude that the demonstrations and campaigns of direct action engaged in during this period have brought more progress to the Negro than any other techniques utilized at any other time in American history, -- and that, therefore, they should be continued



and intensified both in number and in extent. This view would tend to assume that direct, non-violent action appears to be the only way by which justice can be brought to the Negro with any reasonable speed.

Conceding that many variations of these three positions are possible this writer believes firmly that the third position is the soundest of the three. It is more consistent with the events of the past decade and with the nature of the prejudice which the white majority in America has had towards the Negro race than any other approach to the predicament of the Negro in America.

This writer is convinced, in other words, that the concern of whites for the Negro race will fade away if Negro militancy declines and that, in fact, the progress of the nation's 21 million Negroes will continue to come about in direct proportion to the intensity and pervasiveness of Negro militancy.

Does such a view necessarily assume that the white majority in America does not, -- as a group or as an organized society, -- really and in good faith desire to see the Negro minority equal in status and opportunity to the white majority? The answer to this question must regrettably be "Yes".

If any one thing is clear from the way in which white American society has treated the Negro during the past century it is the unmistakable and undeniable fact that Americans have been determined to keep America as an all-white society. Americans have, with consistent and almost neurotic persistence, kept the Negro out of the school books of children and the magazines of adults. By a thousand unconsciously devious ways white America has managed to forget the Negro and to keep him out of the mainstream of American life.

All of this has been achieved -- or at least could have been achieved -- without any necessary personal prejudice against Negroes on the part of individual white persons. It has been achieved by the operation of the silently assumed major premise of American society that ours is a white culture of European origin based on the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The pervasiveness of this unconsciously held tenet of White-European supremacy has blinded Americans to even the presence of one-tenth of the nation that is of non-white and African origin.

The concept of America as an all-white nation with European roots has so permeated the collective consciousness and the "image" of America which the white majority of this nation possesses that there is simply no place in American society to which they can assign non-white persons of African ancestry. It does not matter whether one calls this malaise of American society a type of blindness or a form of white nationalism or sheer prejudice. The tragic fact is that for the white majority in America the Negro simply does not fit into the homogenized cultural and racial concepts which the majority has for its "image" of America.

Through the unconscious activities of the white majority in America the whole thrust of American life has been to keep the Negro apart, to render him invisible and to confine his children to non-white schools. All of this will continue and indeed will grow worse until the white majority opens its eyes to the presence and the plight of the Negro. The Negro has concluded -- and all of history supports him -- that the white majority in America will not be cured of its blindness towards the Negro until the Negro forces the white power structure to recognize and to act upon the presence and the problems of the Negro.



It is simply undeniable that the Negro, by the dramatic events from the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 to the Selma March in 1965, has caught the attention of the white majority as never before in American history. During the past decade it has become increasingly impossible for any white citizen not to take a position with respect to the militant demands of American Negroes for equality and freedom. Some whites -- in both the North and the South -- have joined the white citizens' councils and are demanding that the Negroes return to the invisible, inaudible and sub-American status which they have had for over a century. Other whites -- hopefully a majority of the white majority -- have been so jarred by a decade of demonstrations that their minds and hearts are open to every constructive way by which the Negroes of America can attain true freedom.

What will happen, however, to this latter group if Negro militancy declines and civil rights groups follow the advice, -- so often and so gratuitously given to them, -- that they should resolve their controversies in the courts and not on the streets? This writer must regretfully give the reply that in his judgment any decline in Negro militancy and any substantial diminution of justified demonstrations would be a serious and tragic mistake.

This conclusion rests on the assumption that the program of direct, non-violent action of the past ten years has, at least in part, corrected the blindness and deafness of a substantial segment of the white population towards the Negro community. Much of this blindness and deafness, however, almost certainly remains. Consequently more demonstrations and more militancy appear to be the only known solution for a disease which has apparently infected white Americans far more than we care to admit.



As much as one would like to believe that the nation has, by means of a decade of demonstrations, come at least to the "end of the beginning" of a solution to the Negro problem the facts seem to indicate that the economic and educational opportunities for the Negro are not improving in comparison to those available to the white American. Undisputed statistics show, for example, that the economic and financial gap between the status of the Negro and the white is not becoming narrower but rather wider. Similarly educational opportunities in the North for Negroes are not multiplying in the same ratio or proportion as they are for the white.

May we assume that more Negro militancy and continued programs of direct action will serve to improve the economic and educational opportunities available to Negroes?

In view of the past successes of direct non-violent action and the persistence of apathy towards the Negro on the part of the white majority there appears to be no reason to doubt the continued efficacy and the necessity of dramatic demonstrations illustrating the injustices which Negroes suffer in America.

No objective observer of the first decade of the Freedom Movement could counsel those involved that a moratorium or a cooling-off period or any other change of strategy or technique is indicated. The white power structure may manifest anger when it is reminded by demonstrations of the injustice and poverty of the Negroes in its midst. Public officials confronted by Negro demands may proclaim the necessity of law and order rather than justice but well-organized and repeated protests against inequality do have their effect and impact, -- on public officials and on public opinion.

A militant civil rights movement will therefore be needed for the foreseeable future. In fact it may be that in the forthcoming

second decade of the Freedom Movement there will be an even more imperious need for dramatic methods to communicate to the white majority the plight of the Negro. This need will arise from the fact that in the decade to come the nation's Negroes, more than any other segment of America's poor, will be suffering from unemployment and under-employment and from inadequate public school education. These new inequalities will be so little known to even the lower middle class of white persons that the Negroes will be required to employ extraordinary methods even to communicate their new disabilities. Some of the new disabilities or inequalities and the remedies they suggest are the following: -

(1) Almost fantastic methods of automation in industry are on the horizon. Unskilled and even semi-skilled labor will more and more be replaced by machines and data processing equipment. The immediate effect of this development will be to automate out of existence thousands, -- even millions, -- of positions held by the nation's least trained workers. The impact on some ten million Negroes living in Northern urban industrial centers is evident.

The processes by which machines will replace men in the next decade will take place so rapidly and will be so unobserved even by whites in the lower socio-economic class in America that Negroes must continuously and persistently dramatize the catastrophic effect which an accelerating automation will continue to have on the Northern urban Negro.

Among the remedies proposed or at least suggested to counteract the phasing out of countless jobs held by Negroes are preferential hiring, a quota system designed to employ a certain percentage of Negroes and a program of compensatory re-training financed by unions and employers. Almost any one of these ideas usually elicits from



most white persons a hostile reaction of a highly emotional nature. This reaction derives from the fact that most white people fail completely to see the legal and moral justification for a plan to extend unusual assistance to Negroes with regard to employment opportunities; that justification is grounded, of course, in the undeniable fact that American society has a moral and, to some extent, a legal duty to give indemnification, restitution or reparation to today's Negro because his present predicament is the result of immoral attitudes and illegal activities on the part of American society over a very long period.

Any rational discussion about appropriate methods to rectify the Negro's contemporary socio-economic condition is not really possible until or unless the discussants agree that the white majority in America has a moral obligation to efface, to the extent that this is possible, -- the abiding effects on today's Negroes of the immoral policies of segregation and discrimination which white America carried out towards Negroes for more than a century. America, in other words, cannot blandly say that it will assist today's Negro to overcome his limp without recognizing that American society is profoundly and permanently responsible for inflicting on the Negro the crippling and devastating injuries the results of which are so appallingly clear today.

The enormous problems in the field of employment which the Negro will face in the next decade are matched if not surpassed by the dilemmas which he will confront in seeking to overcome the educational limitations of the all-Negro public school.

(2) Most white Americans seldom reflect on the fact that almost all of the adult Negroes with whom they have contact attended all-Negro schools. White Americans are quick to criticize the

Negroes they encounter, -- usually as either allegedly too apathetic or too aggressive about life -- but these white critics seldom if ever trace the asserted faults of Negroes to the all-Negro schools they attended.

During the very recent past there has come about some understanding on the part of the public of the limitations of the all-Negro school. But that understanding is apparently not yet deep enough to form the basis of any widespread consensus that racially balanced schools should be a moral and legal imperative.

In the decade ahead the question of the all-Negro or predominantly Negro school will be even more of a burning issue than any unusual proposals to improve the employment opportunities of Negroes. Both for white and Negro the racially balanced school will be both the symbol and the substance of their conflicting views of the place of the Negro in American society. For the white person the advent of a Negro youth into his child's school is an event which clashes with the white majority's image of America as a nation of white-European ancestry. For the Negro the refusal or the reluctance of the white community to accept his child into an all-white school is a sign and an omen that the white majority will resist every effort of Negroes to participate in American life on the basis of legal and social equality.



## CONCLUSIONS

Every indication therefore seems to point to the predictive need of the continuation of a militant campaign of direct, non-violent action in the second decade of the Freedom Movement. Factors in the areas of opportunities in employment and education for Negroes suggest that new crises in these areas will certainly arise within the next few years.

Those who are skeptical of the results and effects of the decade of civil rights militancy which is now ending have the obligation of suggesting an alternative way in which justice and equality could be secured for the Negro race in America. Unless such an alternate way is proposed every person who, sincerely and in good faith, desires to give true freedom to the Negro must conclude that the American nation will not bring about this objective unless the civil rights movement in the next decade continues to be militant, persistent and non-violent.